

ANNE REES

LAUGHARNE CORPORATION AND THE PERROTTS

Laugharne (pronounced 'LARNE') is a small town on the South Wales coast about 12 miles South West of Carmarthen. It sits on the estuary of the River Taf (what a lovely name for a Welsh river!) and has been designated as a special conservation area. Since starting on the family history trail I have made many visits there and have acquired a considerable affection for both the place and its people.

In 1566 it was described as a village of 90 houses, but rapidly expanded during Tudor times whilst also gaining a somewhat unsavoury reputation as a haunt of pirates who in those days infested the Bristol Channel. Thereafter the population gradually declined. In 1851 it was 1,431 and in 1861 was still 1,394 with 322 dwellings; but by this century it had fallen below 1,000.

I ought to explain that the village is, and always has been, a rather eccentric place, a fact of which the 'locals' are proud. The village has its own customs, its own castle (owned, as all members will know, by Sir John Perrott), its own characters and its own dialect. The town has always been split in half; 'Up-town' where the people of means lived, and 'Low-town' where the fishermen and sailors lived. The castle gates mark the boundary. There was a considerable population of Flemish weavers in the town, and although for many centuries the two populations did not mingle at all, the Flemings have contributed many verbal quirks to the Laugharne dialect.

Laugharne is best known as the home of the great poet and drinker, Dylan Thomas. He wrote 'Under Milk Wood' here, basing 'Llaregub' on the village and the characters on the residents. Many of the inhabitants have memories of the poet and take a rather dim view of tourists who come to Laugharne on the track of Dylan Thomas. "After all", they say, "he wasn't a real Laugharnie. The village has much more interesting things to show."

Dylan Thomas wrote the following lines about his adopted home: 'Some, like myself, just came, one day, for a day, and never left; got off the bus, and forgot to get on again. Whatever the reason, if any, for our being here, in this timeless, mild, beguiling island of a town with its seven public houses, one chapel in action, one church, one factory, two billiard tables, one St. Bernard (without brandy), one policeman, three rivers, a visiting sea, one Rolls-Royce selling fish and chips, one cannon (cast iron), one chancellor (flesh and blood), one Portreeve, one Danny Raye, and there is a multitude of mixed birds; here we just are, and there is nowhere like it at all.'



To be accurate it is neither a village nor a town, but a township; people are proud of the Charter granted to the Burgesses by Sir Guido de Brian in 1290. Laugharne, and Malmesbury in Wiltshire are the only two townships in the country which retain their ancient Charter. Laugharne still has its Corporation, headed by the Portreeve with his chain of golden cockle shells, the Court, Grand Jury and Burgesses. On the Burgess Roll are over 450 "Burgages" the senior 76 of whom hold for life "strangs" or plots of land of varying rentals. separated by a ridge known as a 'landscar'. Every year the Portreeve appoints a Baliff whose duty is to open the Court with the traditional "Oyez,oyez,oyez! Draw near all ye members of Her Majesty's Court Leet and Court Baron. Gentlemen of the Jury, answer your names!"

The Whit Monday of each third year witnesses the Common Walk or 'Beating the Bounds'. Starting at dawn after the traditional 'Portreeves Breakfast' it involves most of the township in a rugged 23 mile cross country journey. En route are 24 'hoisting places' such as Green Back, Moldin Bit, Halfpenny Furze and Featherbed Lane. Woe betide any luckless spectator who fails to give the correct name of the 'hoisting place' for he or she is straightway turned upside down and given 3 strokes with the Constable's staff on the place nature has provided for this purpose. Thus are the boundaries kept from age to age.

Having joined the 200 or so people on the last walk, which celebrated 500 years of the Charter, I can assure you that it is not to be undertaken by the faint hearted!

Laugharne appears in one of Merlin's prophesies:- "Kidwelly was, Carmarthen is, but Laugharne shall be, the greatest city of the three." So far, the closest it seems to have come to fulfilling this role came in the reign of Elizabeth the First, during the tenure of Sir John Perrott. It was one of the chief towns in Wales, being then bigger than Cardiff.

Since the Perrotts were a prominent family within the township, one would expect them to appear from time to time in the papers of the Corporation. First, I looked for Sir John Perrott in the records, but, of course, because he was the Lord of the Manor, he was debarred not only from a post in the Corporation, but also from influencing the election of Officers. However, there is a fleeting reference, as follows:-

'The hundred of John Perrott, knight, held at the Guild Hall of Tallaugharn, on Monday October 1st, 10 Elizabeth, before John Donn, Portreeve, according to the custom and liberties practised there, the same, as long as one can remember. The Jury, seventeen men, after being sworn, say that the Portreeve must pay to the Lord of the Manor the annual rent of £9/2s/3d'.

The first Perrott to achieve the honour of Portreeve was however another John Perrott. He served from 1658 to 1660, and

was one of the longest serving officers. In 1660, the year of the Restoration (when Charles the Second came to the throne after the passing of Oliver Cromwell's government) he led the rejoicings at the end of the "Sequestrator's tyranny". He paid Sir Sackville Crowe, then Lord of the Manor, £2/16/0d " for an ox to roast at the celebrations". The Common Walk was celebrated in great style! John says, "Paid for one barrell of beer and tobacco (sic) on the perambulation, 15/-"

Although several Perrott names appear in various lists of Burgesses, the only other one to become Portreeve was one Thomas Perrott in 1792. He was the brother of one of my direct ancestors, Walter Perrott, who served as a Burgess at this time along with 2 other brothers: John, who later moved to London as a vintner, and David, who became a succesful auctioneer in Swansea and started the line of Terry Perrott (member no.A46) and Marjery Delahoy (member no. 27).

Thomas's reign seemed to pass uneventfully, but from the following document I think we can assume he was not without spirit:

" TOWN OF LAUGHARNE DECEMBER 17th,1792.

The Portreeve and Grand Jury of the Corporation request a meeting of the inhabitants thereof and of the neighbouring parishes upon Friday the 21st day of December instant at the Town Hall, in order to enter into an Association to oppose the propagation (sic) of Opinions repugnant to our happy Constitution and the most valuable Priviledges of Englishmen."

The document is signed by Thomas and 11 members of the Grand Jury. Unfortunately we do not know the nature of the repugnant opinions. What is interesting is that this group of Welshmen refer to the "Priviledges of Englishmen". This confirms that Laugharne is the gateway to that part of South Wales which has always been known as 'Little England beyond Wales' and whose inhabitants feel that they have more in common with the English than with their more nationalistic countrymen. Later, the number of Perrotts living in Laugharne started to decline and they became less involved in the township. The traditions of Laugharne continue, of course, and it is still a much sought after honour to be elected to the Corporation.

Perhaps this is a time to note one of the less dignified duties of the Recorder of the Corporation. The chief toast at the Portreeve's feast is to "the immortal memory of Sir Guido de Brian, the founder of the Corporation." After the toast, the Recorder must sing the following song:-

When Sir Guy de Brian lived in Laugharne,
A jolly old man was he.
Some pasture land he owned, which he
Divided into three.
Says he, "There's Hugdon and the Moor
They will the Commons please;
And all the gentlemen shall have
Their share down on the Lees."